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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1034  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4582  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8123  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5684  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1486  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1442  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000248

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO  
PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BM

SUBJECT: BURMA: YOUNG ACTIVISTS ADVOCATE NEW APPROACHES

REF: 07 RANGOON 1055

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Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Young pro-democracy activists advocate new, more creative approaches to bringing political change inside Burma. The current pro-democracy movement has been weakened severely by the arrests and crackdown after the September protests. It lacks leadership, strategic planning, and unity. Direct aid to political activists is limited in reach and scope because of the intense scrutiny they are under by Special Branch Police. Some activists want the U.S. to expand its assistance to include grass-roots civil society initiatives that promote education, capacity building, and community building throughout Burma, to better strengthen the foundations for a future democratic political system. End summary.

¶2. (C) Young pro-democracy activists, members of NLD Youth, 88 Generation Students, and ethnic political activists, advocated for an expanded, more creative approach for U.S. assistance for promoting democracy in Burma, during a recent meeting. The activists are students in the Embassy's distance learning program with Indiana University that allows former political prisoners, and those shut out of Burma's education system for their political activities, to earn a U.S. associates degree. The students offered us their opinions of the pro-democracy movement and how best to effect democratic change in Burma.

¶3. (C) The activists noted that since the September crackdown and the recent arrests of key leaders in the pro-democracy movement, the movement lacks leadership, strategic planning, and unity. While most political activists were aware of the exile border groups and their activities, the reach of these exile groups inside Burma was limited, and many associated with the exile groups were regarded as opportunists by the political activists inside. Information from the border groups has not been widely circulated or discussed inside the country, they claimed. The one exception, they noted, was the reach of the Burmese-language broadcasters such as DVB, BBC, and RFA,

whose programs were widely listened to throughout Burma as the best source for daily news. Asked about the penetration of exile websites such as Irrawaddy and DVB, the students told us these outlets only reached a small portion of Burma's population, who were politically astute and had access to internet cafes in the large cities.

**¶4.** (C) While direct financial assistance to political activists inside Burma was needed and appreciated, the students remarked that those receiving the money often had the least space to operate, as they were well-known to authorities and closely watched by Special Branch police. The regime's close scrutiny limited the outreach and effectiveness of these activists and the organizations associated with them. The U.S. had been giving support to political activists inside and outside Burma for a long time, with little result, the students concluded. It was time to try other, more creative approaches that took advantage of the limited space available inside the country, the activists recommended.

**¶5.** (C) Most important, they advocated, was support for grass-roots civil society initiatives that promoted education, capacity building, and community building, which could be expanded gradually throughout Burma. Some of the activists explained how they were working to promote civic responsibility within their own villages and communities by participating in or teaching English classes, which enabled them to initiate discussions on democratic principles and responsible civic participation. The students articulately argued that any democratic political structure in Burma would collapse without a strong foundation. Strengthening this foundation through civic education and capacity building would be necessary for successful democratic change.

**¶6.** (C) Comment: We welcome the new ideas and creative

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approaches younger activists offer to promote democratic change inside the country. We regret the zero-sum mentality exhibited by the recipients of our generous assistance the past twenty years. The small grants program the Embassy initiated two years ago to build civil society has revealed considerable space for us to help build the civil society healthy democracies require (reftel). As a bonus, such programs have also expanded our reach into Burma to better monitor political developments on the ground. We have also seen other Burmese organizations, INGOs, and UN agencies help build civil society by empowering local people to take more control over their futures. The Burmese People get little but harassment from regime officials as it is. These civil society capacity building projects further diminish the power of the regime.

**¶7.** (C) Additionally, We believe having an assistance delivery network in place is crucial for successful democratic change in Burma. The demonstrations of 1988 lasted a period of several months (March - September), across the country. The pro-democracy opposition's inability to organize themselves and deliver basic services to the country in 1988 provided the military justification to take back control. We very much want to see democratic leaders succeed, but the Burmese regime has done their best to keep them divided. We need now to encourage them to unify to organize so that they can deliver services effectively to the people.

**¶8.** (C) By developing a humanitarian and civil society assistance network inside Burma, we can increase the changes of success of a political transition to democracy. A democratic government will have a short window to deliver quick, desperately needed assistance to Burma's 55 million people. At the same time, they will have to contend with distrustful ethnic minorities looking for reasons to pull away and a military more than willing to step in again.

¶9. (C) We have seen a generational change within the pro-democracy movement inside Burma since 2005. The younger activists are bringing new ideas to the table and are more willing to experiment with different approaches to Burma's political impasse. We should be equally flexible and creative in trying new approaches to resolve Burma's frustrating political stalemate. End comment.

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